



BLM WILDERNESS



What is Wilderness?

Many people use the word wilderness in the traditional sense to describe any piece of undeveloped land. Since passage of the 1964 Wilderness Act, the word has also come to mean Federal land officially designated by Congress as part of the National Wilderness Preservation System. This fact sheet discusses Federal wilderness and explains the role of the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) in administering its wilderness areas.

In the Wilderness Act, Congress said Federal lands must have certain special characteristics to be considered for wilderness preservation:

- 1) they must be in a generally natural condition;
- 2) they must have outstanding opportunities for solitude or a primitive and unconfined type of recreation;
- 3) they must be at least 5,000 acres or large enough to preserve and use as wilderness; and
- 4) they may also contain ecological, geological, or other features of scientific, scenic, or historical value.

Congress also said an area designated as wilderness must be managed to preserve its wilderness character. Although there are legally allowed exceptions, such as emergencies and ad-

ministrative needs, wilderness designation generally means:

- no commercial uses are allowed (the exceptions include livestock grazing and certain ongoing mining and mineral leasing);
- no permanent or temporary roads are allowed;
- no use of motorized vehicles, equipment, or motorboats are allowed;
- no landing of aircraft is allowed; and
- no structures are allowed.

Four Federal agencies are authorized to administer lands as part of the National Wilderness Preservation System. The Department of the Interior's National Park Service and Fish and Wildlife Service and the Department of Agriculture's Forest Service were given authority through the 1964 Wilderness Act; the Department of the Interior's Bureau of Land Management was given authority through the 1976 Federal Land Policy and Management Act (FLPMA).

Lands administered by any of these agencies become part of the National Wilderness Preservation System only through official designation by Congress.

BLM's Involvement

Although the wilderness authority in the FLPMA is critical to the BLM's wilderness review effort, the Wilderness Act is the driving force behind many aspects of the program. The Wilderness Act identifies the criteria for evaluating public lands for wilderness and gives direction on how designated wilderness will be managed. The FLPMA sets deadlines for reporting wilderness recommendations, requires studies to be conducted, and specifies how the lands under wilderness review will be managed.

To fulfill these requirements, the BLM basically performs five functions in the wilderness program.

The agency:

- 1) **inventories** the public lands for wilderness characteristics;
- 2) **protects** areas undergoing wilderness review;
- 3) **studies** identified wilderness study areas (WSAs);
- 4) **reports** these recommendations to the Secretary of the Interior; and
- 5) **manages** all wilderness areas designated by Congress to preserve their natural character.

Inventory

The FLPMA requires the BLM to review all roadless public land areas of 5,000 acres or more and roadless islands to identify those with the required wilderness characteristics. Areas less than 5,000 acres can also be considered in certain circumstances under the basic planning authority of the FLPMA.

The Act also states that lands designated by the BLM as primitive or natural areas prior to November 1, 1975 automatically qualify for wilderness study. These are referred to as Instant Study Areas.

To guide the inventory on the 174 million acres of BLM land in the lower 48 States (Alaska was not included in the original inventory), the BLM developed a Wilderness Inventory Handbook. The handbook called for a two-step inventory process. Both steps involved broad public involvement.

During the *initial inventory* conducted between 1978-1979, areas that were generally recognized by

the BLM and the public as obviously having no wilderness characteristics were eliminated from further wilderness review. This initial evaluation reduced the acreage under consideration to about 50 million acres.

With this acreage now as the focus, the BLM began the *intensive inventory*. During this phase, conducted between 1979-1980, BLM resource professionals conducted on-the-ground inspections of each area. These professionals looked at each area to determine the presence or absence of wilderness characteristics. Public participation was encouraged, both during the field inspections and the public review of the BLM's intensive inventory findings. The public was responsive; more than 10,000 comments were received from across the country. At the end of the intensive inventory, the BLM designated the areas possessing the basic characteristics as wilderness study areas or WSAs.

Interim Protection and Management

These WSAs are managed differently than the rest of the public lands. This interim management applies until the time a final decision is made by Congress as to whether they become part of the National Wilderness Preservation System or are released for nonwilderness uses. Once an area is designated wilderness it is managed to preserve its natural character as required by the 1964 Wilderness Act.

To help the public understand which activities could and could not be authorized in WSAs, the BLM developed, with the public's help, the Interim Management Policy and Guidelines for Lands under Wilderness Review.

The policy closely follows the congressional mandate, particularly in acknowledging the distinction among three categories of activities:

1. new activities occurring after the FLPMA's passage on October 21, 1976;
2. grazing or mineral uses in operation prior to that date; and
3. valid existing rights.

New activities can be allowed in a WSA if they meet what is called the "nonimpairment" standard contained in the FLPMA. Congress said that lands under wilderness review were to be managed "so as not to impair the suitability of such areas for preser-

vation as wilderness." To meet this standard, activities must not cause any significant impacts, except those that can be removed or made substantially unnoticeable by the time the Secretary reports to the President on the WSA. Depending on climate, soils, and topography, this standard can accommodate some mineral exploration and other activities, but any long-term development will depend on Congress' wilderness decision.

Congress also said certain mining and grazing uses already in existence when the FLPMA was passed could continue. Commonly called "grandfathered uses," the law says these activities can continue in the same "manner and degree" as when the FLPMA became law.

Valid existing rights, such as valid claims under the 1872 Mining Law and mineral leases issued before October 21, 1976, are eligible for full development. Like all activities on public lands, however, they must be conducted in a manner to prevent "undue or unnecessary degradation" as directed by the FLPMA.

Applying such complex legal criteria on the ground on a case by case basis is a challenge. The BLM managers work very closely with all those interested to ensure interim management fully meets the requirements of the law.

Study

Once public land areas possessing the basic wilderness characteristics specified by Congress were identified, the detailed wilderness studies began. To guide this effort, the BLM developed, again with the public's help, its Wilderness Study Policy.

The primary goal of the BLM wilderness study process is to analyze an area's suitability or unsuitability for preservation as wilderness. This analysis is made through the BLM's established land use planning system based on the resource data, evaluations made by the BLM's resource professionals in the field, and public comments.

The wilderness values in the WSA are evaluated in the context of all the other multiple uses present in the area. The analysis is accompanied by an environmental impact statement and released for public review.

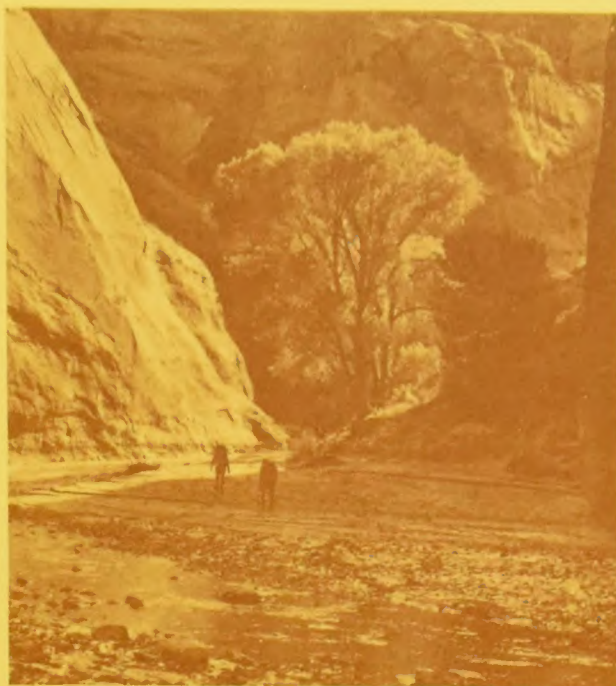
The central question in a wilderness study is: "Is this area more suitable for wilderness designation or more suitable for nonwilderness uses?" To answer this question, the study examines each WSA from three different standpoints—what are the area's wilderness values, what effect would wilderness designation have upon present and potential uses of the area, and what does the public think?

In analyzing wilderness values, the BLM considers the quality of the area's naturalness, its opportunities for solitude or for primitive and unconfined recreation, and any special features such as geological, ecological, scientific, educational, scenic, or historical values.

The study also analyzes whether wilderness designation would have any beneficial effect upon other resource uses and whether designation of a particular WSA would contribute to expanding the diversity of the National Wilderness Preservation System. The BLM also analyzes whether or not each WSA is capable of being managed to preserve its wilderness character.

In the wilderness study process, tradeoffs between wilderness and nonwilderness uses are examined closely. The BLM identifies all uses and potential uses of the WSA other than wilderness (such as energy and minerals or timber production) and analyzes how wilderness designation would affect these potential uses.

Then, turning the tables, the BLM evaluates how the land would be managed if the WSA is not designated as wilderness, and analyzes how this type of management would affect these wilderness values.



Paria Canyon Wilderness Area, Utah-Arizona

The study also examines the local social and economic effects of wilderness designation and considers whether designation would be consistent with existing land use plans of State and local governments, Indian tribes, and other Federal agencies.

BLM periodically publishes a study schedule to keep the public informed of progress and plans. The schedule reflects the BLM's desire to accelerate wilderness studies as much as possible to save study costs while still maintaining study quality and adequate time for full public involvement. This acceleration means that about 90 percent of all the BLM wilderness studies will be completed by the end of 1987.

Once the BLM completes its field studies and the public has reviewed the draft findings and recommendations, the Geological Survey and Bureau of Mines begin their work on the mineral evaluations required by Congress. Each mineral evaluation currently takes about two to three years to complete. To make best use of the time available, these detailed studies are done only on areas initially recommended by the BLM as suitable for wilderness designation. However, in developing its preliminary recommendations, the BLM uses all minerals information available from public and private sources.

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Reporting

The FLPMA requires the Secretary of the Interior to complete his review of the public lands for wilderness potential and report his findings to the President within 15 years (October 21, 1991). The Secretary's reports include the BLM's final suitability report, the final environmental impact statement including analysis of public comments, the public hearing records, and the mineral evaluations conducted by the Geological Survey and the Bureau of Mines on any area recommended as suitable for wilderness.

The final step of the reporting process is for the President to make his recommendations to Congress. Only Congress can designate an area as part of the

National Wilderness Preservation System.

This is the sequence of reporting outlined in the FLPMA for the President and the Secretary of the Interior to follow. However, sometimes Congress finds it necessary to consider an area for wilderness preservation when the studies are still ongoing and no Presidential recommendation has yet been made. When this occurs, the Department of the Interior testifies on the legislation using all information available at the time to give Congress an idea of the area's suitability or unsuitability for wilderness preservation.

Management

Once Congress designates an area as wilderness and the legislation is signed by the President, it immediately becomes part of the National Wilderness Preservation System.

To guide on-the-ground management in these areas, the BLM developed, with the public's help, a Wilderness Management Policy. The policy closely follows the management directions of the 1964 Wilderness Act; it also relies heavily on the experience of the other agencies involved in wilderness management, particularly the Department of Agriculture's Forest Service.

It is the policy of the BLM to manage designated wilderness areas to preserve their wilderness character for future use and enjoyment of all Americans.

Some of the management goals identified in the Wilderness Management Policy include:

- preserving naturalness, solitude, and special

features;

- prohibiting certain uses as the Wilderness Act directs;
- managing visitor use to prevent damage to wilderness values;
- regulating special allowed uses (such as livestock grazing) in a reasonable and responsible manner;
- prohibiting buffer zones around wilderness areas;
- providing adequate visitor information and education; and
- ensuring sound administration of each area through development of an individual management plan.

These goals set the framework for the detailed guidance in the Wilderness Management Policy on specific activities that can and cannot be allowed in designated Wilderness Areas.

Public Participation

Public participation has a high priority throughout the wilderness review process. Beginning with the development of initial agency policies, through actual recommendations presented to the Congress, and finally to development of a management plan for each designated Wilderness Area, public participation plays a critical role.

There are several reasons for this. First, since the BLM was the "new kid on the block" as far as Federal wilderness was concerned, it has observed the high amount of public interest in this issue and decided to ensure everyone access to the process at every step of the way. Second, because of the massive amount of information to be collected in a relatively short period of time, the public's assistance and sharing of available information helped save time and money.

Finally, the Bureau believed that if all interested parties were fully involved in the wilderness review process from the beginning, the final decisions reached would have more credibility and public support. Decisionmakers at all levels, including the BLM State Directors, the BLM Director, the Secretary of the Interior, the President, and ultimately Congress, could be confident that they had all available information, options, and opinions on which to judge each area's merits.

Ultimately, this open, public process helps ensure sound, balanced, and objective resource decisions are made to add only high quality public land areas to the National Wilderness Preservation System and to manage those additions for the benefit of future generations of Americans.